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ABSTRACT

This study explores and identifies patterns of teacher, student, parent, and administrator responses to letter grade evaluation systems. The study examined four main points: rationales for letter grades, interpretations of grading procedures and process, the consequences of letter grades, and alternatives to letter grades. The study involved an open-ended questionnaire, formal and informal interviews, and a survey. The researcher determined that letter grades influence the sustenance of traditional curriculum based on behaviorist theory with a resultant "trivialization" of content. Students associate their worth and value as human beings with their grades and focus their attention on finishing their work rather than on learning. The letter grade system seems to support a school curriculum shackled by time. (MD)

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A STUDY OF THE LETTER GRADE SYSTEM AND ITS EFFECT ON THE CURRICULUM

Fredrick Burton

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Introduction

From the primary grades through graduate school, the giving and receiving of letter grades is one of the most pervasive aspects of the educational system in the United States. The presence of a letter grade system is assumed and taken for granted. But its use, its functions, and its consequences are rarely critically examined. To complicate matters, the few critical interpretations of the letter grade system that do surface often vary widely from teacher to teacher, parent to parent, and among administrators.

The purpose of this study was to explore and identify patterns and categories of teacher, student, parent, and administrator responses to the letter grade evaluation system at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. It was not just an attempt to open Pandora's box, but also to ask those involved to critically examine its contents (which more often than not, reside in the mind rather than the box itself). This examination revolved around four main focal points: rationales for giving letter grades; interpretations of the grading procedure or process (i.e., the manner in which it is decided how letter grades should be assigned to students); examining the consequences (both positive and negative) of letter grades; and consideration of possible alternatives to the letter grade system. Data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire, formal and informal interviews, and a survey.

Rationales

Why do teachers give letter grades to students? Just over half (52%) of the elementary school teachers in the survey sample informed us that their primary reason for giving letter grades was because the district required it. Almost another third (29%) of these teachers stated that their primary reason for assigning letter grades was to "inform parents." Through our open-ended questionnaires and interviews, we found that this latter reason could be restated as "because the parents require it" rather than being a conscious professional decision made by the teacher herself. Many teachers felt a sense of estrangement, hoplessness, and a general lack of control or power over the decision to give letter grades. They felt that the locus of power resided somewhere on the outside. Many of these teachers simply did not believe in the system. The following are typical quotes which exemplify this idea.

> I am against the concept of letter grades...process rather than product should be adopted.
>
> The letter grade system is arbitrary and is a remnant of our educational past.
>
> We are locked in by the college system.

However, both middle and high school teachers listed "informing students" as the primary reason for assigning grades. This was often said with conviction and righteousness. Informing students of their academic progress through letter grades was viewed as a "service" to students; it was something the teachers "owed" the students. As one teacher put it:

> Grades are a part of a child's education.

Interpretation

How do teachers go about assigning letter grades to students? What criteria do teachers use to make judgments? About half (51%) of the elementary school teachers listed numerical scores on tests as their primary means of assigning grades. Another 45% use their own observations and professional judgment as the main way to assign grades. Moreover, about one-third (34%) listed student participation and enthusiasm as a "second" consideration for assigning grades. Middle school (83%) and high school teachers (85%) assigned grades based on numerical scores that students received on paper-pencil tests. In addition, well over half (57%) listed observation and professional judgment as their "second" means for assigning grades. Although most of the teachers in the study combined criteria when assigning grades, middle school and high school teachers seemed to rely more on numerical scores on paper-pencil tests than elementary school teachers who used both numerical scores and their observations of students when assigning grades. Perhaps this is because of the self-contained nature of elementary school classrooms.

Consequences

What do teachers see as consequences to the letter grade system? Based on the data collected in this study, the following statements can be made about the issues of pressure, motivation, self-concept, and teacher support as they relate to the giving and receiving of grades.

Pressure:

1. Elementary school teachers are relatively split in their opinions on whether they believe students feel negative pressure resulting from letter grades (about half think grades cause pressure; about half do not).

2. Most of the middle school (76%) and high school teachers (75%) believe that the letter grade system exerts no pressure on students.

3. Over half of the elementary school teachers and middle school teachers feel pressure from parents and administrators when giving letter grades.

4. Many teachers (from 29% in elementary schools to 40% in middle and high schools) feel pressure from students when giving letter grades.

Motivation:

1. Over half of the elementary school teachers and over three-fourths of the middle and high school teachers believe that the letter grade system does not have a negative effect on student motivation although many teachers were undecided about whether grades increased a student's enjoyment or believed it did not increase a student's enjoyment of the learning process (middle school teachers as a group were an exception).

Self Concept:

1. About 43% of the elementary school teachers believed that the letter grade system has a negative effect on how students feel about themselves. Approximately one out of four middle and high school teachers believe that letter grades negatively influence self-concept.

Teacher Support:

1. Most elementary school teachers (63%) believe letter grades are accurate indicators of student learning; middle school teachers are split on this issue.

2. Most middle school teachers and high school teachers believe the positive effects of letter grades outweigh the negative effects (and they also believe in the letter grade system itself). Elementary teachers are split on this issue.

Alternatives

Data collected from surveys, questionnaires, and interviews yielded information regarding teacher beliefs about alternatives to the letter grade system. Well over half (61%) of the elementary school teachers believed

that there are workable alternatives to the letter grade system, while 40% of the middle school teachers and 33% of the high school teachers believed there were no workable alternatives. Of the elementary school teachers who responded, 79% supported checklists of student progress on specified skills, goals, or other outcomes, 68% favored written progress reports, and 60% believed that parent-teacher conferences could be an alternative to the letter grade system of reporting.

About 40% of the middle school teachers and 33% of the high school teachers believed that there were no workable alternatives. Middle school teachers (53%) supported the idea of checklists of student progress as a workable alternative. High school teachers as a group did not check or list an alternative to letter grades in a 51% majority. It is important to point out that a few teachers at each instructional level suggested that the alternatives to the letter grade system listed on the survey could be used to <u>supplement</u> the letter grade system rather than replace it.

In general, elementary school teachers felt more optimistic and gave more support to the idea of replacing the letter grade system with a workable alternative. Perhaps this is due to the smaller number of students that they are required to evaluate.

In addition to teacher views, efforts were made to elicit the perceptions of students, parents and administrators. The sections that follow summarize those perceptions.

<u>Perceptions of Students</u>

A total of 112 elementary, middle school, and high school students were interviewed individually and as a group. The following questions were

asked: Do you like getting grades? Why do you think grades are important? Why do teachers give grades? What do you think grades tell you about your work and yourself? Do you think the letter grade system is fair? Responses to these questions were similar across grade levels. In general, students liked getting letter grades and believed them to be informative and important. To students, letter grades let them know how they are doing in a particular subject and in general. For several students (again, at all grade levels), grades were a manifestation of justice and the concept of work. Good grades meant you were doing your job and thus one deserved high pay (i.e., good grades). Low grades led to just the opposite feeling--bad job, low pay. While most of the students (about 70%) felt the grading system was fair, the rest believed it was not (or were simply unsure). Students who felt it was unfair raised the following objections: different teachers have different expectations and ways to grade; judgment was emphasized over learning; effort and attitudes were not considered. Students who believed the system was fair felt that letter grades were objective, that they protected them from unfair teachers, and that they let the student know how he or she was doing in school.

Perceptions of Parents

A small number (about 20) of parents were interviewed about their perceptions and attitudes regarding the letter grade system. Over half of the parents favored the present grading system and believed it informed them about their child's progress. Parent explanations of what progress exactly meant was varied and diverse. Some parent definitions of "progress" or ideas regarding what grades told them about their child included:

- quality of his/her work
- if he or she could take orders
- the child's effort
- the child's development
- how child compares to other students
- act as a "barometer of life"

While most of the parents believed that there was no alternative to the letter grade system, over half felt that letter grades should be supplemented with more teacher comments.

Administrator Perceptions

Administrators at all levels (twenty-two in all) were given a questionnaire which sought to elicit their beliefs about the letter grade system. Based on their response patterns to the questionnaire, administrators believe that letter grades are a communication device and a way of informing both parents and students about progress in school. Just how well the system does this was a point of disagreement among administrators (about two-thirds believe it was partially or very ineffective). There was little consensus regarding how the letter grade system might be improved.

Final Reflections

Grading influences the curriculum-in-use in many ways. Factors such as policies, parents' and educators' views of schooling and teachers' perceptions of the grading system sustain a traditional curriculum; one undergirded by a theory of behaviorism and operating on an industrial metaphor. As a result, certain sorts of activities are planned at a particular tempo reflective of the report card cycle; this in turn permits students the opportunity to learn certain things, but not others.

As for the overt curriculum, the grading system greatly affected the nature of teachers' planning. Many teachers described this effect as "trivializing" the curriculum. Since letter grades were to be determined numerically, teachers often planned closed-ended, paper-pencil activities calling for convergent thinking to enable them to assign numerical grades for each activity. Less frequently, teachers planned more open-ended activities, but they justified such activities through quantitative testing or grading. Certain sorts of activities tended to predominate partly due to the influence of the grading system. Moreover, teachers reported their planning and evaluation was made to conform and "fit" the six-week interval grading periods in that major tests and projects were due accordingly.

As for the hidden curriculum, students' responses indicated that they seemed to be learning that the most important matter at hand was to obtain points for a letter grade, which may have focused their attention on finishing work rather than upon what they were learning (or wanted to learn). Observation and interviews also indicated that they learned to associate their worth and value as human beings with the grade they were able to make. Just as some of us measure the status of an individual in our society by how much money he or she earns, students may have learned to assess one another and themselves according to the letter grades they received.

Indeed, the letter grade system supports school curricula which are shackled by time. It fosters curricula-in-use that are managed, compartmentalized, and covered instead of "uncovered." It supports that deadly dull paper and pencil curriculum that we know all too well.

But need it be so? I think the following quote of educator-philosopher-physicist, David Hawkins, properly addresses this question.

> In contrast with the best classrooms of England and their more rare counterparts in our own country, the typical American classroom is dominated by one material only: paper. Now, I do not wish to badmouth paper; it is a marvellous material not only for tempura and calligraphy but also for chromatography, many kinds of model airplanes, for miniature houses, and much else. You can make paper with a blender and screen from most plant materials and give it your own watermark, bind it in books of your own binding, or roll it into struts for a geodesic dome. Good books are printed on it, as are good illustrations. But in our schools most of these uses go unimagined or are forbidden (Hawkins, 1979, p. 31).

Perhaps, it need not be so.

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[1]Hawkins, David. "The Enlargement of the Esthetic." Outlook (Winter, 1979), 34, pp. 28-39.